

Our psalm today is perhaps **THE most beloved** portion of scripture we have. It shows up again and again throughout the liturgical calendar -- as an assigned reading and it is probably the most commonly selected scripture for funerals. It is this gorgeous prayer-song that we come back to again and again. And many times, this is where we turn to in our moments of grief. In uncertainty. In loneliness. Psalm 23 describes the Lord as **our shepherd** – leading us through the darkest valleys of life – but also through green and lush pastures, through places of rest and refreshment, in still and quiet places, and along the path of righteousness and justice. And for me, I just LOVE the image of goodness and mercy pursuing me every day of my life – like two big-hearted toddlers who follow you around everywhere you go. :P

The psalm speaks to us in our times of grief – AND it contains so much more! It is a beautiful reminder of the LOVE and CARE that God has **for us**. In a world that is always telling us we need more or that we don't have enough. The psalm tells us that **God has satisfied every need**. One scholar put it this way - God the shepherd "exceeds whatever we may think we desire."¹ And if you wonder if this shepherding God could possibly care about you or your life - we are EACH assured in the story of the Lost Sheep from Matthew today. We hear the Father's will is that **not even one** of these little ones should be lost. **Not even one**. And so, we

¹ James Howell. "Commentary on Psalm 23: 4th Sunday in Lent (Year A)" from WorkingPreacher.org, Accessed 11/9/23.

find hope and assurance, knowing that our faithful shepherd has a powerful love destined to lead us and protect us.

We live in a world where fear and doubt seem to rule – BUT God the faithful shepherd leads us on right paths – offering restoration, stillness, comfort, and blessing. Psalm 23 can be our antidote to the fear-based and scarcity mindset of our world – that there isn't enough to get by – or that there's not enough goodness out there -- or that we don't have the option to just stop and rest for a while.

Several years ago, my church's Youth Gathering road-trip needed a resting spot. We had joined together with another church in our area and were driving from the Black Hills to Denver. There were probably 35 youth and adults caravanning the 6-hour drive. One of the pastors we traveled with had **pre-destined** a sight-seeing stop for us. We all simply followed his enthusiasm and his lead to a pretty desolate parking lot outside of Guernsey, Wyoming. The vehicles all pulled up, parked and unloaded our teenagers into the pavement. As we started exploring the area, we saw something like this.



You can **imagine** the blank faces and the “what the heck are we doing here” questions of the teenagers with us as we made a visit to a stretch of Wyoming prairie with a parking lot and a few interpretive signs. But Pastor Chuck insisted we look around and explore the place a bit.

We were at the Guernsey Ruts National Historic Landmark... I’m sure many of you have visited ... Has anyone visited? (Russ?) For those of you that haven’t been here, the Guernsey Ruts National Historic Landmark is a place along the historic Oregon Trail where the many many wagons that passed by **actually carved ruts** into the rock beneath the trail. These 150 year old ruts are still visible - waist to shoulder deep in some places worn in the soft sandstone rock.²

I’m not going to say that our youth were **exhilarated** by this visit, but once we adopted a spirit of adventure – it was pretty cool to walk in those ruts and think about how many wagons had to travel that same path to make such an imprint on the landscape.

Now, I want to assure you that I am not leading you astray with a random storytime session in the middle of this sermon. As we are reminded in the words of this psalm - God our faithful shepherd, leads us on **right** paths. The Hebrew word used here isn’t a synonym for trail or road – **but more** like “entrenchment or ruts” like those made by a wagon. The paths that God leads us on are like the Oregon Trail carved into the rocks – **deep, enduring, clearly recognizable** for

² <https://ensignpeakfoundation.org/guernsey-ruts-national-historic-landmark-guernsey-wyoming/>

generations. The shepherd leads us and **we KNOW. We KNOW** where we are on the ruts of safety and salvation with the LORD.

According to Hebrew Bible scholar, Joel LeMon “the ‘paths of righteousness’ are more like ruts in the ground, grooves for the wheels of your ox-cart. So walking with Yahweh is finding your groove....to live in a way that promotes and sustains right relationships all around you, with the community and with God.”³

“The paths of righteousness (even if they are holy ruts) do not lead directly from the green pastures to the house of the Lord. No, those righteous ruts go through the very darkest valley (v.4). In Jesus’ case, the paths of righteousness lead all the way to the cross...when we walk these paths of righteousness, we walk with God.”⁴ And this is what the righteous walk looks like – love and care for one another, connection to your Creator who goes with you, valuing the community -- sharing ourselves, our time, and our possessions generously. Stewarding that which God has faithfully entrusted to us.

Our journeys take us ALL KINDS of places. But we have this assurance, that God is leading us on a path that cannot be mistaken, or confused. Ruts of faithfulness so deep, they endure for generations.

³Joel LeMon, “Commentary on Psalm 23: Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost” from WorkingPreacher.org, Accessed 11/9/23.

⁴ LeMon.

Psalm 23 assures God is our faithful shepherd who guides us through all of life. In addition to seeking these words in our grief, I challenge us to let this psalm open us up - to the power of God at work in our lives. As we seek to follow the ox-cart ruts in the road before us. As we go through green pastures and dark valleys. As we seek restoration. As we have our banquets of celebration. And as we let go of fear and trust God the faithful shepherd all the days of our lives. (join me please)

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;

he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me;

your rod and your staff — they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;

you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,

and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

May our faithful response to the shepherd, wear those ruts even deeper for those who come after us – as we walk with God. Amen.